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ABSTRACT

Many studies investigating gender differences in friendships have assumed that friendships were same-sex relationships. Only a few studies have focused on friendships between the sexes and most of these have used college student samples. This study examined friendships of 156 professional men and women using a self-report questionnaire consisting of rating scales and open-ended questions. Four types of friendships were compared: women's same-sex and cross-sex and men's same-sex and cross-sex. The results indicated that while both sexes viewed the characteristics of an ideal friendship in similar ways, their actual experiences of friendship differed. Women's same-sex friendships were rated higher for overall quality, intimacy, enjoyment, and nurturance, while men's cross-sex friendships were rated higher in these areas (with the exception of intimacy which was rated the same by men in both same-sex and cross-sex friendships). Cross-sex friendships provided both sexes with new understandings and perspectives of the opposite sex. Though both sexes reported generally keeping friendships and sexual relationships separate, sexual feelings and tensions created dissatisfaction in a sizable minority of cross-sex friendships. These reuslts are similar to findings from studies with college students, suggesting that women's participation in professional roles has not resulted in dramatic changes in friendship patterns. Charts and a bibliography are included. (Author/NB)

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GENDER AND FRIENDSHIPS: HERS AND HIS, SAME-SEX AND CROSS-SEX

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Abstract

Same- and cross-sex friendships of 156 professional men and women were investigated using a self-report questionnaire consisting of rating scales and open-ended questions. Results indicated that while both sexes viewed the characteristics of an ideal friendship in similar ways, their actual experiences of friendships differed. Women's same-sex friendships were rated higher for overall quality, intimacy, enjoyment and nurturance. Men, on the other hand, rated their cross-sex friendships higher in these areas, with the exception of intimacy which was rated the same by men in both same- and cross-sex friendships. Cross-sex friendships provided both sexes with new understandings and perspectives of the opposite sex. Though both sexes generally kept friendships and sexual relationships separate, sexual feelings and tensions still created dissatisfaction in a sizable minority of cross-sex friendships. These results are similar to findings from studies with college students, indicating that women's participation in professional roles has not resulted in dramatic changes in friendship patterns.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of friendship is a rich area of research for discovering differences in how women and men structure and experience close personal relationships. This is so because friendships, compared to family relationships, are less subject to and less influenced by legal and societal rules. They are relationships that are relatively ambiguous and subjective in form and structure (La Gaipa, 1988). No formal ceremony marks the beginning or end of friendship and even the definition of friendship is subjectively variable (Wright, 1985) which creates a complicating factor in its' study. One person may view a tennis partner as a friend whereas another may use the term "friend" only for an intimate relationship.

Many studies have investigated gender differences in friendships and have just assumed that friendships were same-sex relationships. Their results have been remarkably similiar, indicating that female friendships involved more confiding, intimacy, personal concern and emotional interactions than male friendships.

Only a few studies have focused on friendships between the sexes and most of these have used sample populations composed of college students. The social context is important in the formation and development of friendships and student populations may have different characteristics of friendships than adult populations.

A necessary aspect of friendship, according to Davis & Todd (1982), is equal status and common interests. When there is a large disparity in men and women's social, economic or work worlds, there is a major deterrent to the development of cross-sex friendships (Booth & Hess, 1981). Therefore, to study cross-sex friendships it is important to obtain a population that has common educational backgrounds and interests. This study did just that. The researcher used a sample population of professional working people who were employed in settings in which both sexes were well represented. Same- and cross-sex friendships of the sample population were compared utilizing a self-rating questionnaire.

METHOD

Four types of friendships were compared: women's same-sex and cross-sex and men's same-sex and cross-sex. The sample population was 156 (96 women, 60 men) professional men and women who volunteered to answer a questionnaire that was distributed through businesses and professional organizations.

The questionnaire was composed of evaluative rating scales (1-7) and open-ended questions. The rating scales measured subjects' evaluations of the overall quality and the degrees of intimacy, enjoyment and nurturance of their same- and cross-sex friendships. Following Bernard's lead (1972), cross-sex friendships were studied as two separate groups, (women's and men's perspectives), to determine if there was a "her" and "his" version of friendship between the sexes.

RESULTS

Same-sex and cross-sex friendships of women and men were analyzed using a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 (Gender x Friendship Type x Age x Marital Status) design. Open-ended questions asked for concepts of the ideal friend plus what one liked and disliked about same- and cross-sex friendships as actually experienced. Responses were coded for thematic content and analyzed for gender differences.

Overall Quality

Women rated their same-sex friendships higher in overall quality than men rated theirs. Women also rated their same-sex friendships higher in quality than their cross-sex friendships. For men there was no significant difference in friendship type. See Table 1.

The ANOVA for overall quality resulted in a significant interaction effect for friendship type within subjects' gender ($F = 16.37$, d.f. = 1,151, $p < .001$). Further analysis of the two-way interaction indicated that gender had a significant effect upon overall quality for same-sex ($p < .001$) but not for cross-sex friendships. Also friendship type had a signifcant effect upon overall quality for females ($p < .001$) but not for males.

Intimacy, Enjoyment, Nurturance

Women rated their same-sex friendships more intimate, enjoyable and nurturing than men rated theirs. Cross-sex friendships had a "hers" and "his" perspective only in the area of nurturance, women experiencing their cross-sex friendships as less nurturing, men as more. See Table 1.

The ANOVAs for intimacy, enjoyment and nurturance revealed a significant two-way interaction effect for friendship type within subjects' gender (intimacy: $F=28.92$, d.f. = 1,151, $p<.001$; enjoyment: $F=11.65$, d.f. =1,150, $p<.001$; nurturance: $F=42.82$, d.f. = 1,150, $p<.001$). Further analysis of the two-way interaction indicated that gender had a significant effect for intimacy ($p<.001$), enjoyment ($p<.01$), and nurturance ($p<.001$). Cross-sex friendships indicated a significant gender effect only for nurturance ($p<.05$). Friendship type was significant for women for intimacy ($p<.001$), enjoyment ($p<.01$) and nurturance ($p<.001$) but was significant for men only for enjoyment ($p<.05$) and nurturance ($p<.05$). Intimacy was not significantly different for men for same-or cross-sex friendships.

Age and marital status effects indicated that younger single men rated their same-sex friendships lower in overall quality than all other groups. Age and marital status effects were not significant for intimacy, enjoyment or nurturance.

Open-ended questions indicated that the sexes were closer in their ideal concepts of friendship than in their actual experiences of friendship. Both sexes viewed an ideal friend as someone you could be intimate with, trust and depend on. In actual experiences, women's same-sex friendships were closest to the ideal model of friendship as described by both sexes.

For both sexes, sharing and enjoying activities and good times was the most frequently mentioned response category (50% women, 74% men) for what people liked most about their same-sex friendships. Intimacy/closeness responses were more frequently mentioned by women than by men (28% women, 14% men). These responses indicated personal sharing of feelings, closeness and mutual understanding. See Table 2.

For both sexes, the major dislike mentioned for same-sex friendships was competitveness (women 22%, men 25%). Women's competitiveness was focused mostly on competition for men or for time spent with families, while men's competitiveness was more of a one-upmanship and was seen by many as a serious impediment to trust and intimacy. See Table 3.

What both sexes liked best about their cross-sex friendships was specifically the gender difference and the cross-sex perspective they provided (women 31%, men 25%). The major dislike cited by both sexes was sexual tensions (women 20%, men 28%). Superficiality was mentioned more often as a dislike by women than by men (cross-sex: women 20%, men 8%; same-sex: women 21%, men 11%).

CONCLUSION

While both sexes viewed the characteristics of an ideal friendship in similar ways, their actual experiences of friendships differed in some significant ways. Both sexes experienced sharing and enjoying each other's company as a basic element of friendship. Women, however, emphasized more of the interactional aspects of being together while men emphasized the activity aspects. Greater intimacy and nurturance in women's friendships is the major difference noted between women and men's friendships. These results are similar to findings from previous friendship research that utilized college populations. This suggests that gender differences in friendships remain strong, despite new career roles for women.

Both sexes rated cross-sex friendships in similar ways except in the area of nurturance. Men tended to characterize these friendships as a two-way nurturing relationship; they were nurtured and they gave nurturing to women friends. Yet, most women felt much more nurtured by their women than their men friends, not only in personal but in career areas too. This finding suggests the continuing need for women's professional and support networks to further women's growth and advancement.

Though men and women's experiences of friendships differ in some important ways, their ideas about the ideal friendship were remarkably similar. This suggests the existence of a 'friendship myth', an idealized image of what a friend ought to be and an implicit set of criteria against which actual friendships are compared. For most of recorded history, a friendship myth was modeled on the characteristics of men's friendships - bravery, loyalty, duty and heroism. Women were even considered incapable of true friendship because it was believed that they could not possess those qualities. More recently a new friendship myth has developed in our culture that emphasizes intimacy, caring and trust, qualities more characteristic of women's relationships. Now in some circles it is even questioned whether men can ever be intimate or nurturing enough to be 'real' friends.

Friendship is a relationship that requires a balance of freedom with commitment, intimacy with distance. This balance is difficult for all people but even more challenging when people grow up with quite different experiences based on gender and psychosexual development. Yet in today's world, men and women interact together in many ways. They need to understand, appreciate and respect each other in personal and work relationships. Cross-sex friendships provide an excellent opportunity to bridge these differences by getting an insider's perspective of how the opposite sex thinkgs and feels.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Overall Quality, Intimacy, Enjoyment and Nurturance by Subject's Gender and Friendship Type

	Same-Sex		Cross-Sex	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
	N=56	N=95	N=56	N=95
Overall Quality				
M	5.29	6.11	5.48	5.43
SD	1.42	0.98	1.06	1.26
Intimacy				
M	5.37	6.16	5.55	5.50
SD	1.05	.76	.92	.94
Enjoyment				
M	5.28	5.81	5.58	5.47
SD	1.12	.92	.97	.99
Nurturance				
M	4.86	5.81	5.31	4.92
SD	1.21	.98	1.07	1.17

Note. Range 1-7, Overall Quality 1 item, Intimacy 5 items, Enjoyment 3 items, Nurturance 4 items.

Table 2

Percentage of Responses to Categories for "What do you like most about your friendships?"

	Women	Men
	Same-Sex	
Sharing/enjoying	50%a*	74%a*
Intimacy/closeness	28%b*	14%b*
Caring/acceptance	9%	5%
Trust/depend on	9%	4%
	Cross-Sex	
Cross-sex perspective	31%	25%
Sharing/enjoying	27%	28%
Intimacy/closeness	15%	18%
Caring/acceptance	5%c*	17%c*
Sexual excitement	6%	7%

* Figures sharing a subscript are significantly different from each other at the 0.05 level.

Table 3

Percentage of Responses to Categories for "What do you dislike about your friendships?"

	Women	Men
	Same-Sex	
Competition	22%	25%
Nothing	16%	25%
Superficiality	21%a*	11%a*
Misunderstood	9%	14%
Lack of Time	11%	11%
Lack of Commitment	10%b*	0%b*
Overposessive	9%c*	0%c*
	Cross-Sex	
Sexual Tensions	20%	28%
Nothing	22%	22%
Superficiality	20%d*	8%d*
Misunderstood	10%	16%
Fewer Interactions	9%	9%
Patronizing/sexist	9%e*	0%e*

* Figures sharing a subscript are significantly different from each other at the 0.05 level.

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